

Preparing Principals for Success with English Language Learners: Challenges and Opportunities in Illinois

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This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of the English Language Learner (ELL) components of Illinois' new principal preparation legislation [Illinois Public Act 96-0903]. In 2011, Illinois passed Illinois Public Act 96-0903 creating new rules for principal preparation programs, requiring institutions or organizations certifying students for the principalship to revise programs to align with the legislation. Illinois Public Act 96-0903 focuses on partnerships with schools districts, rigorous candidate selection, an expanded performance-based internship and required program content. With regard to required program content, Illinois Public Act 96-0903 includes provisions that require principal preparation programs to help candidates meet the needs of a few specific populations including English language learners, students with disabilities or 504 plans, and gifted students. The implications for program implementation and policy are explored through a review of the English language learner provisions of a newly redesigned principal preparation program at Downstate University.

Introduction

In 2011, Illinois passed Illinois Public Act 96-0903, which created new rules for principal preparation programs, thus requiring institutions or organizations endorsing students for the principalship to revise programs to align with the legislation. Illinois Public Act 96-0903 focused on partnerships with schools districts, rigorous candidate selection, an expanded performance-based internship, and required program content. With regard to required program content, in addition to legislating that programs align to Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and Southern Research Education Board (SREB) standards, Illinois Public Act 96-0903 included provisions that require principal preparation programs to prepare candidates to work effectively with several subgroups of student populations including English language learners, students with disabilities or 504 plans, and gifted students. Herein we focus primarily on the challenges and opportunities in implementing SB 96-0903 with regard to preparing principals to work with ELL populations.

Statement of the Problem

Illinois mirrors the country broadly in terms of its rapidly changing demographics. For example, the Hispanic population in Illinois is rapidly increasing and, in the last decade, has grown from 12.3% of the total population to 15.8% of the total population (U.S. Census, 2010), which is 32.5% of the overall population growth in Illinois (U.S. Census, 2010). Illinois has the fifth highest Hispanic population in the country after California, Florida, Texas and New York. As a result of demographic changes, Illinois currently enrolls 197,388 students who are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs), which is 8.5% of the total school population (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a). Of the ELL population, 81.5% are native Spanish speakers, and the remainder speak 143 other languages with Polish (2.82% of total ELL population) and Arabic (2.42% of the total ELL population) ranking next largest proportional (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b).

Illinois public schools are clearly struggling to effectively meet the needs of their changing student populations. Large achievement gaps between ELLs and their non-ELL peers are found on the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) and the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) in every tested grade level in both reading and mathematics (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). The achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs in grades three through eight on ISAT reading range from 35 to 52 percentage points (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). The achievement gaps between ELLs and non-ELLs in grades three through eight on ISAT math ranges from 15 to 45 percentage points in mathematics (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). On the PSAE, the achievement gap in reading between ELLs and non-ELLs is 47.5 percentage points while in math the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was 38 percentage points.

These achievement gaps do not come as a surprise given the overall capacity of Illinois' public education system to support effective education of ELLs by actualizing the requirement that every student have access to an approved program and/or by providing adequate funding for ELL programs. In 2011, 98% of the state's identified ELL students participated in state approved programs, but approximately half of the school districts in the state do not have a state approved ELL program, even though they are enrolling small but growing ELL populations

(Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). And, though 98% of teachers in approved ELL programs have the required certification to teach in an ELL program, only 6.8% of their salaries to do so were funded by the state (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b).

A review of the requirements for leaders of approved ELL programs illustrates another aspect of the problem with the capacity of Illinois public schools to serve ELL students effectively. Illinois School Code requires those who direct ELL programs with more than 200 students to hold an administrative certificate and a bilingual endorsement, ENL (English as a new language) endorsement with language designation approval, or an ESL endorsement depending on the type of program they administer (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). But, for programs with less than 200 students, ELL program directors are exempt from the above qualification and are only required to complete two hours of professional development per year, which is likely not enough in most cases to implement a high-quality ELL program.

While data are not available from the state of Illinois to determine the exact qualification of each bilingual program director, some inferences can be made from a review of available data on the size of school districts reporting ELL populations. Of the 677 school districts reporting that they have ELL students, only 115 of the programs are large enough to require an ELL program director who is certified as an administrator or supervisor with an appropriate ELL endorsement. The remaining 562 districts report less than 200 students and therefore are exempt from the program director qualifications for larger districts (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). Within these 677 districts, there are approximately 1070 individual public schools in Illinois with an ELL population of at least 40 (Northern Illinois University, 2013).

While there are undoubtedly and understandably practical concerns operating behind the exemption for districts with small ELL populations, in practice it means that many ELL programs are being administered by administrators with minimal training in working with ELL students and that the administration of a given program may not be at the school level. Currently, in many smaller districts, the building principal is likely the person who is overseeing a state approved ELL program in addition to his/her other responsibilities. In a rural area, this person may also be the principal of a second school or might serve an additional role such as that of superintendent. These facts suggest very strongly that many districts may not currently have the capacity necessary to administer a high-quality ELL program. Until SB 96-0903 was passed, the requirements for an administrative certificate did not include any requirement for teaching aspiring administrators to work with ELL students and administer ELL programs, and these are the principals currently employed in the field.

In sum, many districts serving ELL students do not have an approved program, and of those that do, many are too small to require the more rigorous qualifications for the school leaders. And, because a very small percent of the cost of bilingual program teachers is actually funded through state or federal funds, education for ELLs in Illinois is in essence an unfunded mandate.

Certainly, these selected data and more were on the dashboard of legislators and state employees working to draft and pass SB 96-0903, which included several key provisions for preparing principals to work with Illinois' ELL population. The ELL population in Illinois is growing, and available evidence shows that Illinois schools are not effectively meeting the needs of ELLs in Illinois. The purpose of this study was to look at the challenges and opportunities in SB 96-0903 for preparing principals to work effectively with ELL populations, with a particular focus on rural Illinois. This study most directly benefits institutions and organizations who plan to prepare principals under the new law, but will also be of interest to stakeholders involved in

the passage of the law, and to stakeholders who are likely to be impacted by SB 96-0903. In this paper, we argue that while reform is clearly needed to improve educational outcomes for ELL and other subgroups of students in Illinois, SB 96-0903 is unlikely to provide the desired results for two primary reasons: (a) the current PreK-12 public school system in Illinois is not effective at educating ELLs and therefore aspiring principals will not have access to internship experiences that will adequately prepare them to lead highly effective ELL programs, and (b) the racial demography of Illinois will limit many downstate interns' access to schools with a state approved ELL program.

Theoretical Framework

Analysis of the challenges and opportunities of Illinois' principal preparation reform can be enhanced by considering it through the lens of situated cognition. Situated cognition is a theory of learning that emphasizes the critical importance of context in the learning process. In their seminal work, Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) assert that from a situative cognitive perspective, knowledge cannot be separated from the context of its use, that learning occurs from engaging in authentic situations, that knowledge can be defined as tools that "reflect the particular accumulated insights of communities" (p. 33) and that learning is social activity that occurs through an enculturation process.

Situated Cognitive theory is based on a premise that learning occurs through an enculturation process called "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Through this process, a newcomer becomes a veteran by induction to a *community of practice* and through ongoing participation in the authentic and everyday activities of that community. Brown, et al. (1989) suggest that one way newcomers can participate in a community of practice is through a *cognitive apprenticeship*. Brown et al. describe a cognitive apprenticeship as a teaching method that "try[s] to enculturate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction." (p. 37).

The theory of situated cognition is particularly relevant to this study because principal preparation in Illinois now legislates an intense, programmatic focus on an a performance-based internship that takes place over an extended period of time in the field with a practicing principal who is considered on at least a few state-determined measures to be effective. In fact, the internship is one of the most salient features of Illinois's principal preparation reform. Until SB 96 0903 was passed, institutions preparing principals might have included a practicum, but the details were not legislated. The reform is premised on the idea that aspiring principals need to move beyond learning declarative knowledge, or "knowing that" and procedural knowledge, or "knowing how" to apply these two forms of knowledge while engaged in authentic activities in actual schools. According to Brown, et al., (1989) cognitive apprenticeship methods "try to enculturate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction in a way similar to that evident, and evidently successful- in craft apprenticeships" (p. 37). Using the language of situated cognition, the required internship can be viewed as a cognitive apprenticeship where the intern is enculturated into the practices of a successful principal.

Method

The concerns addressed in this paper surfaced during the efforts of Downstate University (a pseudonym) to redesign its principal preparation program in order that it be approved under SB

96-0903, the new principal preparation rules. While trying to address state requirements for preparing principals to work with English Language Learners, program faculty discovered several aspects of meeting legislative requirements that provided challenges for Downstate University. The authors of this paper conducted action research to better understand ways to overcome the challenges experienced during the redesign process. This study was guided by two research questions: (a) What are the specific requirements in SB 96-0903 related to preparing aspiring principals to work with English Language Learners and how can Downstate University meet those requirements?; (b) What are the particular challenges for Downstate University in implementing the ELL provisions of SB 96-0903 in its principal preparation program given the demographics of its service region?

Data Sources

In order to answer question one, ISBE 23 ILLINOIS ADMINISTRATIVE CODE 30; Subtitle A: Chapter I; PART 30 Sections 30.10-30.80 associated with SB 96-0903 was reviewed. All sections of the administrative code associated with the new principal preparation legislation were reviewed. In order to answer question two, available data on a cohort of Downstate University's internship placements were analyzed. The sample examined was the list of internship placement schools for the fall 2010 cohort from Downstate University. The total N of the cohort was 45. Schools that did not have information available in the Illinois Interactive Report Card database were eliminated (private and out of state schools) resulting in an N of 35.

Procedures and Analysis

To answer question one, 23 Illinois Administrative Code, Subtitle A, Chapter 1, Subchapter b, PART 30 was reviewed in its entirety for reference to the following terms: English Language Learners, Bilingual, ELL and "all students." All instances with direct reference to preparation of principals to work with ELL were noted. Next, the principal preparation program from Downstate University was reviewed to see how the requirements of SB 96-0903 were operationalized. Finally, the challenges and opportunities inherent in SB 96-0903 were determined by evaluating the difference between Downstate University's current and needed capacity for delivering the new program.

To answer question two, to focus on the specific challenges and opportunities for Downstate University inherent in implementing SB 96-0903, a spreadsheet was developed that included each internship placement school for Downstate University for the Fall 2010 semester which was determined to be a typical semester in both size and internship location after reviewing three years of data. The Illinois Interactive Report Card was used to find the district for each school (Northern Illinois University, 2011). A state generated report was used to find out which districts have ELL programs approved by the state of Illinois (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b). Finally, the number of ELL students for each school was obtained from an ISBE census report (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011c). These data were used to create a simulation for determining the challenges and opportunities for principal interns to work with ELL students during their internship.

Findings

Research question one asked: What are the specific requirements in SB 96-0903 related to preparing aspiring principals to work with English Language Learners and how can Downstate University meet those requirements? SB 96-0903 was operationalized in the rules set forth in ISBE 23 ILLINOIS ADMINISTRATIVE CODE 30; Subtitle A: Chapter I; PART 30 Sections 30.10-30.80 (hereafter called “the Rules”). The Rules are divided into nine sections plus an Appendix: (a) Definitions, (b) Purpose and Applicability, (c) General Program Requirements, (d) Internship Requirements, Assessment of the Internship, (e) Coursework Requirements, (f) Staffing Requirements, (g) Candidate Selection, (h) Program Approval and Review, and (i) Internship Assessment Rubric. Direct reference to preparing principals to work with ELL populations is found in several sections of the rules. Section 30.30 explains general program requirements and states that each approved program shall offer curricula that address student learning and school improvement, with specific attention aimed towards students with specific special needs. The following special needs are included: students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, and early childhood students (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011). With regard to internship requirements, Section 30.40 mandates that internships shall consist of engagement in instructional leadership activities that involve teachers at all grade levels including, including regular education teachers and teachers of gifted education, special education, and bilingual education (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011).

Section 30.45 discusses internship assessment and states that the candidate shall “analyze the school’s budget to include a discussion of how resources are used and evaluated for adequacy and effectiveness, make recommendations for improvement, and evaluate the impact of budget choices—particularly on low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011d, para. 3. b). Under this section, the candidate will learn to work with school personnel to identify English language learners (ELLs) and “administer the appropriate program and services as specified under Article 14C of the school code [105 ILCS 5/Art. 14C] and 23 Ill. Adm. Code 228 (Transitional Bilingual Education) to address the curricular and academic needs of ELLs” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011d, para 4). The rules state that evidence of meeting this competency will be demonstrated when interns do the following:

- use student data to work collaboratively with teachers to modify curriculum and instructional strategies to meet the needs of each student, including ELLs and students with disabilities, and to incorporate the data into the School Improvement Plan;
- evaluate a school to ensure the use of a wide range of printed, visual, or auditory materials and online resources appropriate to the content areas and the reading needs and levels of each student (including ELLs, students with disabilities, and struggling and advanced readers);
- in conjunction with special education and bilingual education teachers, identify and select assessment strategies and devices that are nondiscriminatory to be used by the school, and take into consideration the impact of disabilities, methods of communication, cultural background, and primary language on measuring knowledge and performance of students

- leading to school improvement;
- work with teachers to develop a plan that focuses on the needs of the school to support services required to meet individualized instruction for students with special needs (i.e., students with IEPs, IFSPs, or Section 504 plans, ELLs, and students identified as gifted);
- proactively serve all students and their families with equity and honor and advocate on their behalf, ensuring an opportunity to learn and the well-being of each child in the classroom;
- analyze and use student information to design instruction that meets the diverse needs of students and leads to ongoing growth and development of all students; and
- recognize the individual needs of students and work with special education and bilingual education teachers to develop school support systems so that teachers can differentiate strategies, materials, pace, levels of complexity, and language to introduce concepts and principles so that they are meaningful to students at varying levels of development and to students with diverse learning needs (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011d, para. A-G).

Finally, Section 30.50 illustrates coursework requirements and states that candidates must demonstrate understanding of state and federal laws, regulations, and case law regarding programs for students with disabilities and English language learners (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011).

Downstate University has addressed these rules in several ways. Downstate University's redesigned program includes eight face to face courses that address all of the required content from the rules and four internship courses that span a minimum of a two semester timeframe. To address Section 30.30, Downstate University embedded ELL specific content across all of its non-internship courses. For example, in each of the non-internship courses, Downstate University candidates are expected to apply course content in multiple contexts and with various subgroups of students by demonstrating:

...an ability to work in collaboration with administrators in real settings at all grade levels (i.e., preschool through grade 12) and with all students with specific attention on students with special needs (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, students in early childhood programs, low SES students). (Downstate University, 2011).

To address Section 30.40 and Section 30.45, Downstate University required all of the internship competencies outlined in the Internship Assessment Rubric be adapted for all of the populations noted in Section 30.30 (students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, and students in early childhood programs). Both of these aspects of Downstate University's new program pose challenges and opportunities.

Geographic Challenges for Downstate University

Research question two asked: What are the particular challenges for Downstate University in implementing the ELL provisions of SB 96-0903 in its principal preparation program given the

demographics of its service region? Review of the rules associated with SB 96-0903 demonstrated that a primary focus in preparing candidates to work with ELL students occurs during the internship, where most of the provisions for working with ELLs are set forth. In order for candidates to be able to have meaningful and authentic experiences in working with ELL programs, access is needed to approved ELL programs with large enough ELL populations to afford a rich internship experience. Ideally that the internship school would have an ELL population of more than 200 ensuring that the ELL program director has more than the minimum required qualifications. These would be minimum requirements and do not address the important issue of whether interns are immersed in quality ELL programs where they may have a better opportunity to learn best practice.

Analysis of a typical cohort of interns showed that there is a paucity of approved ELL programs in Downstate University's large service region and that the region's ELL population is primarily concentrated in one school district. Thirty-four candidates interned in 26 different schools. Of those 26 schools, only five had a state approved bilingual program (11 candidates total interned at schools with approved ELL programs). Of the 11 candidates who interned at schools with approved ELL programs, only two interned at schools within a district with a large enough ELL population to require the more rigorous qualifications for the ELL director.

The number of ELL students in the internship schools ranged from zero to 103. Two students interned at one school with 103 ELL students. Three candidates interned at three schools with 75-100 ELL students. Three students interned at two different schools each reporting 34 ELL students. Eight interns were placed at schools with less than 20 ELL students and 16 of the candidates interned at 13 schools that reported no ELL students. Of these 16 interns, none interned in a district with an approved ELL program, and all were geographically isolated from any school districts that had an approved ELL program. It is also noteworthy that due to other aspects of the Rules, it is possible none of the schools in a district with an approved ELL program would be able to accept interns due to other requirements of the legislation such as building principals' experience and failure to make Annual Yearly Progress. Given these data, one of the biggest challenges for Downstate University will be locating and accessing ELL students and programs where interns can be placed.

Discussion

The quality of candidate preparation in a principal preparation program to lead effectively in schools with ELL populations depends on the collective qualifications of those teaching in the program including university faculty, university internship supervisors, and mentors in the field. Clearly in a region such as that served by Downstate University, where few if any of the above professionals have likely worked with ELL students and populations, there is an enormous learning curve for all involved. While overall lack of capacity with regard to effective practice with ELLs is a challenge, it also provides an opportunity for all involved. University faculty and university internship supervisors have a chance to take the lead in school improvement. By including appropriate content on working effectively with ELL students and developing ELL programs in all university coursework associated with principal preparation, the university could have a direct impact on the quality of programming in internship sites in Downstate University's region. The benefit would be interns who bring this knowledge to their practice with ELL students and populations at their internship sites, which might increase capacity in area schools. It is likely that this required emphasis could provide a catalyst for mentors to examine their own

practice with the ELL students in their schools which will hopefully lead to improved student achievement for ELLs over time. The theory of situated cognition would support the notion that in these situations, interns could function as the mentor in the community of practice. Given the data on the status of approved ELL programs in Downstate University's service region, infusing the region with energetic interns who are challenged to develop and apply their knowledge of ELL students and programs in multiple internship experiences towards the achievement of ELLs, a noticeable and exponential impact is possible.

Challenges and Opportunities

Clearly the biggest challenge for Downstate University, considering the demographics and geography of the region, is that posed by the requirement that interns work directly with ELLs. Downstate University's region does not include large populations of ELLs or a wide range of state-approved ELL programs such as those that are found in the Chicago metropolitan region. It is highly unlikely that most candidates will intern at a site with either an approved ELL program or a sizable ELL population due to the demographics of the region. Because of the sparsely populated nature of the region, it is likely that for many interns it will not be feasible to intern at a nearby school that might be more able to provide these types of opportunities. Many students will be applying their learning of the needs of ELL students and populations in settings with scant ELL populations and no currently approved ELL program. From the lens of situated cognition, it is unlikely that candidates will learn to be effective leaders of schools with ELL students from an internship experience that does not provide the opportunity them to engage in the authentic work of learning to lead with ELLs under the tutelage of an effective mentor.

One opportunity inherent in this challenge is that through the additional support of the intern, schools that have been unable to gather enough resources to adequately serve their (albeit small) ELL populations will have additional support in doing so through the work of the intern and input of the university faculty supervisor. Those schools that have yet to experience the impact of Illinois' demographic changes more broadly will find themselves poised better to do so after interns have helped lay the groundwork for future ELL students.

Because it is not reasonable or feasible to limit admission to those students who have easy access to an internship site with an ELL population or a state-approved ELL program, other options will have to be explored. One idea that has been successful in other regions is the development of collaborations and partnerships between principal preparation programs and districts that are currently offering approved ELL programs. This partnership could result in a demonstration site that could provide an opportunity to gain experience with ELL students and programs that would not be otherwise available. Partnerships with school districts that have high quality ELL programs would allow interns to conduct school visits and see what a larger, high quality program looks like in action. Another possibility for addressing lack of access to high quality ELL programs would be to leverage technology to move far beyond Downstate University's geographic boundaries. Perhaps with virtual partnerships, even within the state of Illinois, aspiring leaders could broaden their leadership skills through meaningful interaction with a virtual internship site. From a situative cognitive perspective though, none of these solutions are likely to result in true mastery of the competencies needed to effectively lead in schools with substantive ELL populations.

Policy Implications

While the demographics of Illinois are changing, they are not changing in the same ways consistently across the state. The ELL population is concentrated in the Chicago area meaning it is much easier geographically for principal preparation programs to facilitate access to high quality ELL programs during the field experiences and internship. In fact, a review of the Illinois Interactive Report Card database shows that most interns in the Chicago metropolitan area would have access to gaining experience in an approved ELL program at their own school or at least within their own school district. This is the exact opposite of the experience of students outside the Chicago metropolitan area. Outside of the Chicago metropolitan area, the number of ELL students is growing, but for many potential interns, qualifying programs are inaccessible because of distance.

Rather than take the chance that programs will offer minimal opportunities for mastery to candidates because of demographic and geographic limitation, it seems wise to reconsider the practicality of the ELL provisions of SB 96-03. While Downstate University does not serve a region with high levels of ELLs, there are other forms of diversity (socio-economic and racial), which though passingly mentioned in the new law, are not a primary focus of it. From a perspective of situated cognition, focusing on effective leadership within the existing forms of diversity would afford each candidate the opportunity to engage authentically in the contexts available in learning to lead well in their community of practice. And in Downstate University's region, academic achievement for those subgroups is also an urgent concern.

SB 96-0903 focuses on only a few subpopulations (ELL, SPED, gifted, and early childhood) while omitting provisions for other subpopulations of students that frequently experience achievement gaps. Most noteworthy in the Downstate University region is the cursory mention in the legislation of teaching principals to work with students living in poverty (which is mentioned twice but not operationalized anywhere in the rules). Illinois in general has experienced a surge in poverty in the last decade, particularly among youth. While the overall poverty rate is 13.8% (Heartland Alliance, 2011), forty-nine percent of the state's public school population is receiving free and reduced lunch (Northern Illinois University, 2014).

In addition to a lack of focus on teaching principals to work effectively with students who have low socio-economic status, there is no mention at all in SB 96-0903 of teaching principals to meet the needs of students from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, and also no mention of the importance of closing the achievement gap between boys and girls. Yet, data show that Illinois's achievement gaps are in no way limited to the gap between ELL and their non-ELL peers. For example, since 2007, there has been an achievement gap between Black and White students in Illinois in all tested subjects at all grade levels every single year (Northern Illinois University, 2014). In this example, the gap posted between Black and White students in 2013 is in most cases greater than any of the preceding six years (Northern Illinois University, 2014). The exact same pattern is present when the achievement gap between Low-income and Non low-income students in Illinois is examined. Since 2007, in every single grade, in every single subject a large gap exists between Low-income and Non low-income students in Illinois.

Clearly, improving educational outcomes for ELLs in Illinois should be a priority, but achievement gaps in Illinois are by no means limited to ELLs versus non-ELLs. Given the fact that every principal will face challenges with the groups not mentioned in the legislation, that there are several AYP subgroups not mentioned at all in the legislation, and that only a small percent of graduates will obtain jobs where they work with ELLs, it seems that the policy would

be far more likely to improve educational outcomes for more students in Illinois with a few important changes.

First, the definition of all students needs to be expanded to include all AYP subgroups at a minimum. This broader definition of “all students” needs to be thoroughly infused into the legislation and its associated code. Next, institutions that prepare principals need flexibility in applying the rules during the internship so that the focus is on school improvement in general. Candidates should be expected to specialize their internship towards areas needing improvement at their internship sites rather than being required to work with a constricted and predetermined list of subgroups that may or may not actually exist at their school. Candidates should be expected to demonstrate their competency at closing achievement gaps in the setting that is geographically available to them regardless of the subgroups with whom they work. Candidates could exit their programs with competency in effectively improving educational opportunities for one or more subgroups very effectively.

Given the complexity of the principal’s job in the current educational context, it is possible that it isn’t feasible for a candidate to attain the mastery needed to be a truly effective leader with all subgroups in one, 2-year master’s degree, regardless of the quality of that program. Illinois should consider creating tiers of principal endorsement. Rather than run the risk of an aspiring principal trying to learn so much during their preparation program that they learn little or nothing very well, a basic endorsement could be offered that demonstrates that the candidate has a developing level of skills at various aspects of school leadership. The second tier of the principal certificate could signify mastery at leading schools with various AYP subpopulations and include additional training and field experiences designed to develop various dimensions of cultural competence, including ELLs but also perhaps including students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and racial subgroups -- AYP subpopulations that deserve our full attention if they are to benefit from Illinois’ public schools.

Summary and Conclusion

Although SB 96-0903 has the potential to improve educational outcomes for ELLs and other subgroups by changing principal preparation, it is unlikely to do so for two important reasons. First, the current PreK-12 public school system in Illinois as a whole is not consistently effective at educating ELLs and therefore, even aspiring principals with access to a school with a substantive ELL population will likely not have access to internship experiences that will adequately prepare them to lead highly effective ELL programs if one assumes that access to a successful community of practice is required for such learning. Without unprecedented changes in the collaboration between university faculty, interns, principals, and other practitioners, interns will work in schools learning practices that, in general, often do not succeed with ELL students, as is demonstrated by recent achievement data. Even worse, if interns work with principals who are not effective at leading schools that promote achievement for ELL students, they may learn to perpetuate ineffective practices. Driscoll (2005), in discussing some of the pitfalls of cognitive apprenticeships describes the learning that occurs in an ineffective organization as “fossilization,” where an intern “simply adopts the practices of the organization and fails to develop more competent or sophisticated skills” (p. 175). The human geography of Illinois is such that most principal candidates in Illinois outside of Chicago will have little or no access to any ELL program at all where they might actualize one of the intended outcomes of the legislation, which is to become effective in leading schools with populations of ELL students..

Without access to a community of practice, a cognitive apprenticeship is not possible. And in addition to being unlikely to promote better education for ELL students, SB 96-0903 misses the mark because it is not flexible enough in the way it defines all students. Rather than leveraging the actual demographics of the state to provide every candidate with opportunities to learn how to improve schools in a local and authentic context, university programs are required to teach aspiring leaders to improve schools for populations of kids that may be hundreds of miles away. The passage of SB 96-0903 in Illinois seems a clear example of putting policy before capacity. Richard Elmore notes that,

Elected officials —legislators, governors, mayors, school board members— generate electoral credit by initiating new ideas, not making the kind of steady investments in people that are required to make the education sector more effective (2011, p. 35).

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